

THE WESTERNERS

By Samuel H. Moffett

The first westerners to reach the unknown and forbidden land of Korea were traders, sailors, diplomats and missionaries. And first of all was the missionary. Gregory de Cespedes, a Portuguese Jesuit, landed at the tip of the peninsula in the bitter winter of 1593. He worked there for a few months as chaplain for the invading Japanese troops of Hideyoshi, but in that role his opportunities for meaningful contact with any Koreans were nil.

He was not the first European to see Korea, however. That honor was earned by the merchant-sailor Captain-Major Domingo Monteiro a few years earlier, in 1577. On the long trading voyage from Lisbon to Japan his Portuguese carrack barely escaped shipwreck off Cheju-do (Quelpart Island). Peering through the storm at "the wild coast of Korea" he gave thanks for his deliverance and proceeded on to his destination.

Not for another three centuries, in the 1880s, did Korea begin to open its closed coasts to westerners. It is true that French priests intermittently began to penetrate the barriers, beginning in 1836, but they did so



only at peril and often at cost of their lives. In fact, when the first Protestant missionary, Dr. Horace Allen, M.D., arrived in 1884 he was allowed to stay only because he managed to attach himself to the American legation as its physician, and he observed that the French priests in the capital were still disguising themselves as mourners with covered faces whenever they ventured into the streets by day.

The aristocrats of the tiny western community in Korea in those early days were the diplomats, men like the first American Minister, General Foote. Gray-haired and imposing, he bore his military title with honor, though it had been won not too heroically

by service in the Civil War as military attache to the governor of the unthreatened state of California. As the first western diplomat accredited to the Korean court he arrived soon after the signing of the Korean-American treaty of 1882.

Mrs. Foote, who came with him, was the first western woman Korea had ever seen, and Queen Min was so curious to know what she looked like that before too many weeks had passed she sent her own royal sedan chair with bearers to carry the foreign woman to the palace for a courteous inspection and conversation.

Eccentric but also imposing was Paul Georg von Moellendorff, a Prussian in the employ of the Chinese empire who had been recommended by the Viceroy Li Hung Chang to the Korean king as an adviser on foreign relations and customs administration. His mission, as the Chinese conceived it, was two-fold: to counter the threat of Japanese political ambitions in Korea on the one hand, and of western economic dominance on the other. One of the prime sights of Seoul was the burly Moellendorff sauntering down the street with his entourage, his hair carefully done up in a Korean top-knot surmounted by a traditional Korean horse-hair hat. Every inch of him, he hoped, had the air of a proper Korean marquis, which was the title bestowed upon him by the king.

More quietly authentic was Walter Hillier (later Sir Walter) who distinguished himself

in the 1890s first as Consul-General and then as the first British Minister to Korea. But among the most effective early diplomats were two young assistants, W.G. Aston at the British Legation, a linguist well trained in Far Eastern affairs, and Ensign George Foulk, U.S. naval attache and for a while acting charge d'affaires, who was greatly trusted by King Kojong. Foulk was a sensitive and sympathetic observer of the Korean scene. He had studied Chinese and spoke Japanese. The young reformers of the 1884 emeute confided in him and, though he was careful to avoid any direct involvement, his sympathy with their hopes for the modernization of the troubled nation may well have cut short his career in Korea.

In 1884 the entire residential American community in Seoul numbered eight, of whom five (including Mrs. Foote) were with the American legation, two were missionaries (Dr. and Mrs. Allen), and one was a businessman (W.D. Townsend).

By 1890 the number of Americans had been augmented by the arrival of the first wave of Protestant missionaries direct from the United States. (The Allens had come by way of China.) Still there were not more than about 60 westerners in the capital, of whom perhaps twenty were missionaries. And foreign residence in Korea outside the treaty ports of Seoul and Pusan was still forbidden.

The pioneer Protestants, after Dr. Allen,

were Horace G. Underwood and Henry G. Appenzeller, both clergymen and both blessed with a healthy combination of zeal for education and enthusiasm for evangelism. The little schools they founded were to become famous; and Underwood's brother John is said to have remarked, "I stayed home to make typewriters; my brother Horace went to Korea to make Christians." The newest arrival in early 1890 was Samuel A. Moffett, who soon chafed at the restrictions prohibiting residence in the interior which cooped him up in the capital. His first attempt to move north and settle in the ancient city of Pyong-yang left him dazed and bleeding in the street from a stoning by an angry mob.

Memories of the bloody 19th century persecutions were still vivid. Only twenty-four years earlier, in 1866, a violent persecution launched by the Taewon-gun, the prince regent, had swept two thousand or more Catholics to their deaths. Twelve of the first twenty-six western missionaries who dared to enter Korea had been martyred, all but one of them Catholic. But the times were beginning to change. In 1893 Moffett was finally able to establish permanent residence in the interior. And in the late 1890s Bishop Mutel, dean of the Catholic missionary community, was actually able to baptize the wife of the great persecutor, the Taewon-gun, though he had to smuggle himself into the palace at dead of night to do so.



In those days a good proportion of all the western foreigners in Korea were quartered in Seoul's Chongdong area, just inside the West Gate, near the American, British and Russian legations. The center of social life was the tennis court, which typically appeared as soon as westerners surfaced in any numbers anywhere in Asia. "Why don't

they let their servants hit the balls?" one immaculate Korea *yangban* (noble) growled, as he incredulously watched the foreigners running back and forth in the hot sun.

Nearby was Miss Sontag's Hotel, another social oasis for westerners far from home. Her French cooking was the best in Seoul. Her German efficiency and motherly compassion (she was over 60) endeared her to the royal family when it fled to the Russian legation after the murder of Queen Min. So she became an unofficial adviser to the court on western protocol, and for ordinary foreigners she was a tireless hostess, tour-guide and surrogate mother.

Elsewhere in Korea living conditions for foreigners could be rather grim. Dr. Allen's first night in "Harry's Hotel" in Chemulpo (Inchon) was a taste of difficulties to come. The one-story thatch-roofed building boasted only a bar and a billiard room separated by a sheet. At night guests slept on the billiard table and the sheet was taken down to cover them. In the morning the billiard table became a breakfast table, and the sheet turned into a tablecloth.

All in all, it was a rather strange and varied little western enclave, "those foreigners stranded in the Korean kingdom," as the urbane British writer Henry Savage-Landor patronizingly described them on his visit to Seoul in 1890. "If you take them separately, they are rather nice people, though, of course at least a dozen years

behind the time as compared with the rest of the world; taken as a community, however, they are enough to drive you crazy."

The missionaries were a distinct and somewhat equivocal segment of that community. By 1894 there were about 118 westerners in Korea, of whom 14 were in diplomatic service, 69 were mostly in business, and about 35 were missionaries. Divisions were sometimes sharp. To many, the missionaries were fanatics, and in the case of one otherwise worthy soul they were right. "Old Fireblower," as he was called by his fellow missionaries, had the lamentable habit of rushing into Buddhist temples and lopping the heads off statues, or trying to.

On the other hand some of the earliest criticism of the missionaries was that they were not religious enough. They became involved in such worldly concerns as efforts to raise Korea's standard of living. Underwood brought in kerosene and agricultural implements, for example. Moffett organized a timber concession on the Yalu. Swallen and Adams introduced sweet apple trees to Korea. To commercial traders this was unsought competition, all the more difficult to contend with because the motive was not profit so much as to teach the Korean converts how to survive the shattering impact of the technologies and economies of the West.

To others, like the indefatigable Victorian explorer, Isabella Bird Bishop, missionaries

were worthy of all respect for bringing the best of the West to the East. Exploring Korea in 1894, she wrote admiringly of three women of the Australian Presbyterian Mission whom she visited in Pusan. "Except that [their] compound was clean, it was in no way distinguishable from any other, being surrounded by mud hovels. In one of these, exposed to the full force of the southern sun, these ladies were living. The mud walls were concealed with paper, and photographs and other knickknacks conferred a look of refinement. But not only were the rooms so low that one of the ladies could not stand upright in them, but privacy was impossible . . . so that even dressing was a spectacle for the curious . . . [Yet] all the neighbors were friendly and rude remarks in the streets had already ceased. Without any fuss or blowing of trumpets [these missionary ladies] had gained general confidence and good will."¹ Mrs. Bishop does not say so, but it seems likely that one of those three women was Miss Menzies, aunt of Sir Robert Menzies, later prime minister of Australia.

But the influence of that small western presence was out of all proportion to its numerical strength and should not go unremembered. Just to list a few of the names reads like a roll of honor in the history of the modernizing of Korea. There was Ensign Foulk who conducted the first official tour

1. Isabella Bird Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbors*, p. 28-29.



of Korean envoys to the West, taking them as far as Washington, D.C.; and the determined Methodist, Mrs. Mary F. Scranton, who started a girls' school against all odds and struck a blow for the emancipation of women in stiff, Confucian Korea. There were businessmen, like W.D. Townsend and his superior, James R. Morse, who gave Korea her first railroad; and the French engineer, Leonie Cuvillier, who pioneered new mining techniques for an industry which not many years later was to bring to Korea an engineer who rose higher: Herbert Hoover.

The military were there. The American general, William Dye, opened the first western-oriented military training school to

shore up the security of a small country threatened by giant neighbors; and a Russian colonel, named Potiala, drilled the palace guard; while missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant laid the foundations for the fastest growing Christian churches in Asia. A German, von Moellendorff, and a Britisher, McLeavy Brown, not only modernized the country's Customs Office (the only Korean government institution staffed entirely by foreigners), but Moellendorff also planned the reform of coinage, and Brown taught the technologies of western-style large building construction, directing the modernization of Toksu Palace.

Mrs. Bishop, Homer B. Hulbert and especially Dr. James S. Gale (the Canadian missionary who was, in the words of Dr. William Baird, "half Scotch, half Dutch, half French, yet completely English and somewhat 'bohemian'") were the writers of the period who best captured the color and spirit of those critical decades in Korea when East and West, newly met, were feeling each other out, half afraid, half eager, in the turbulent confines of the small peninsula.

It is quite true that the foreigners were at times critical and insensitive to the strengths and beauties of a civilization far older than their own. In this they were no more than reflecting the general temper of the great age of discovery and western colonialism, an age which only in their own time was beginning to come to a close. Nevertheless, for

every westerner who spoke contemptuously or patronizingly of "lazy Koreans" or "dirty villagers," there were others who genuinely loved the "friendly, gentle people," admired their patience and uncomplaining industry, and who quoted with appreciation the Koreans' own description of their country as "the queen of ten thousand peaks, ten thousand islands and ten thousand waterfalls."

One charming vignette of how the surprises and frictions of the clash of cultures could melt into mutual appreciation is the account of the ice-skating party in the winter of 1887. Queen Min had heard that the foreigners had a strange, almost magical art of walking on ice. They had shoes, she had been told, which permitted them, it seemed, to sail on the ice as boats sail on water. Curious, she asked her missionary physician, Miss Ellers, to bring a group to demonstrate the art at the palace. So one cold winter day a mixed group of missionaries, diplomats and businessmen—German, Canadian, American and British—trooped to the lotus pond at Kyongbok Palace. There, while the king watched from the pillared pavilion in the center of the pond and the queen peered out from behind a screen, the foreigners glided and whirled until snow began to fall and they were invited in for a hot, specially prepared western dinner at the palace.

The western presence in those early years need not be overstated. Western trade in

Korea never developed beyond a peripheral pattern. Western diplomacy was soon crippled, first by the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, and then almost terminally by the Japanese victory over Russia in 1904-05. For a time even the remarkable success of the missionaries was checked by Japanese suspicions and restrictions.

Some of the primary agents of change in this period of rapid transition were missionaries like the kinetic Dr. Horace Allen, M.D., who doubled as a diplomat, and who, in one way or another, had a hand in bringing Korea her first modern hospital, her first electric streetcars, her first waterworks, her first city lighting and her first modern mine. His fellow missionary physicians, Heron, Wiles, Landis, Scranton and Avison, all contributed to a radical revolution in medicine in Korea—especially the early women doctors, Lillias Horton Underwood, Alice Fish Moffett and Rosetta Sherwood Hall, together with the Anglican nurses of the Sisters of St. Peter, whose access to Korea's cloistered women opened doors otherwise sealed to foreigners. A parallel revolution, in education, transformed the old Confucian ways yet more radically with the introduction of western ideas and methods. This too was led by missionaries — Appenzeller, Underwood, Baird, Moffett, Mrs. Scranton—and not only through their schools but also through the literature and translations of Gale and

Reynolds, and the books of the Methodist Mission's Tri-Lingual Press.

The first western resident to die in Korea in these years was Allen's successor at the Royal Hospital, Dr. John Heron.² His death in 1890 posed an unanticipated problem. He had to be buried, of course, but where? No burials for anyone, not even royalty, could be permitted inside the city walls, and foreigners at that time were not allowed to own land outside the walls. There was no legal way to bury a foreigner. Through the U.S. minister a request was made for the purchase of a suitable spot outside the walls. Delays followed with no official response. At last the legation let it quietly be made known that for obvious reasons something had to be done and that the missionaries might have to bury the deceased inside the mission compound. Almost immediately a beautiful spot outside the West Gate overlooking the river was made available. After the funeral, Moffett wrote, "We now have a new interest in the land of Korea. The first foreign grave here is that of a missionary who gave his life for the Korean people."

2. Dr. Heron was not the first *westerner* of this period to die in Korea. Captain George B. Mott died and was quietly buried in Chemulpo in July, 1883. Captain Mott was not, however, a resident. He was in Korea for a port call during a trading mission and contracted an abruptly terminal illness.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

KOREA 1880-1910



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